

CONSCIOUSNESS AS FOOD

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ABSTRACT

If we load our consciousness with toxins and violence we should not be surprised by what occupies the driving seat of our life. If we fill our consciousness with nutriments that foster the energy of mindfulness, we can look forward to enjoying life with a different energy. The intricate connections between eight levels of consciousness are explored to bring home the reality that how we feed our consciousnesses, shapes our lives and destiny. I begin with the Buddha's Son's Flesh Sutra and end with a story about Two Wolves. The bottom line between these stories is awareness about the consequences of our consumption, so that we do not create internal violence to our systems - or to the systems we interconnect with.

Meditation

When we go into meditation it is like entering the ocean, swimming into a vast sea of mind. It is so easy to get into difficulties as we encounter the strong and dangerous currents of thoughts, feelings, mental formations, ego projections and distortion, which come from different levels of our consciousness. We could easily drown in the products of our consciousness, so to prevent this from happening we go back to a concentration on breath in order to swim back to the shore and be safe. We focus our mind fully on being aware that we are breathing in when we are breathing in; fully on being aware that we are breathing out when we are breathing out. We stand on the shore, safe through the conscious use of breath, and observe the ocean currents and dangerous eddies without participating in them. It is too easy for us to participate in these dangerous currents and get carried away, overwhelmed and become lost. So we have to be skillful, creative and be right there, present, in order to keep the Buddha alive within us. We ask "Am I really here?" or "How do I feel right now?" or entreat Mother Earth to "Bring me back!" Or we can sing "I have arrived" on the in breath, "I am home" on the out breath.

These questions, and concentrations on breath, keep us in the zone of bare recognition, and out of the dangerous depths of consciousness that can destroy our solidity and compassion. They prevent us from sinking into distortion, delusion and depression.

The tools available for this are conscious breathing, walking meditation and other mindfulness practices. We do not analyze or compare too much. We just practice mindfulness to recover ourselves from the confusion and distortion offered by different levels of our consciousness. To assist and guide our practice we need true teachers, men and women who have navigated these waters and found the way through. It is also why we need a solid sangha, to embrace and share the practice as we rely on dharma brothers and sisters who are steady and can help us. A good teacher and a solid sangha provide a safe vessel to cross waters that can be difficult and stormy.

Thus it is imperative to learn about the mind and consciousness, so that we are fully prepared for the spiritual pilgrimage through layers of consciousness that offer only confusion and distortion and to then penetrate to the deepest level of consciousness that reflects the fullness of our very being. The deepest level of consciousness – the store consciousness - is identified by the Buddha as the fourth source of nutriment. We consume much more than edible food. We also consume with our senses, desires and cravings. This consumption then feeds our store consciousness which “eats” everything we put into it. If we fill it full of toxins, violence and other negative energies, then it is this accumulation in our consciousness that then drives us. On the other hand if we feed our consciousness with mindful nutriments, then a different energy occupies the driving seat of our life, one that guides us to live a life full of understanding, love, compassion and joy. This is the energy of mindfulness.

Shariputra, one of the Buddha’s most intelligent disciples, was very clear about this when he emphasized that Right View (the keystone of the Buddha’s Eight Fold Path), is also the understanding of nutriments. His point was that we understand what has come to be, only by identifying the nutriments that caused it. If we wish to change what has come to be, we cut off the supply of nutriments that caused it. Very simple in theory, yet often difficult to practice, as we have become addicted to consumption habits which are not easy to relinquish. That is, until we become aware of the dire consequences of consuming in a manner that is dangerous for the state of our health, consciousness and planet.

The Buddha talks about four kinds of nutriments:

1. Edible Food
2. Sense Impression Food
3. The Food of Volition
4. Consciousness Food.

In this essay I refer only to Consciousness as food.

Store Consciousness

The store consciousness is like an ocean, fed by the six rivers of the sensory organs, by the edible food we consume and by the food of volition. It consumes and eats all the time and the physical and mental aspects of what we consume is manifested back to us through our store consciousness. What we put into it, is what we get out of it! It is easy to understand that this consciousness, so constrained by our consumption, shapes our lives because we feed off it. It is the ground of definition for how our body, mind and spirit manifest. If the nutriments from edible foods, sensory inputs and volition have loaded our store consciousness with toxins and negative energies, then that is the sum total of what then drives us. The collective mix of toxins manifests in our form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and evolving consciousness. This is our life as it is, and in understanding how it has come to be (Shariputra's Right View), we begin to understand that toxic overload destroys any possibility of congruence between our speech, thoughts and actions, and between our body, mind and spirit.

Yet by knowing how the different nutriments contribute to the store consciousness that feeds and defines us, we can then make clear choices about the nutriments to consume and those we must exclude. It is, in fact, much more intricate than this as we have to understand how the many layers of consciousness interconnect. Fortunately I am able to draw on a brilliant and profound discourse, a penetrating analysis of consciousness by Thich Nhat Hanh (2001). In a crystal clear fashion he renders a Mahayana interpretation of consciousness based on the Manifestation-Only School, that I find compelling. This book is about Buddhist psychology and in his understanding of the workings of the mind and consciousness, Thich Nhat Hanh provides the reader with navigational co-ordinates for mindfulness practice, peace and transformation.

The deepest level of our consciousness – store consciousness – contains absolutely everything – all possible mental formations, both positive and negative, the darkest elements of ignorance, hatred and greed as well as the enlightened mind of the Buddha, the love and compassion of Jesus. The store consciousness contains everything. How we then feed this deep level of consciousness shapes our lives and destiny. The activation and actualization of the wholesome seeds of potential in store consciousness, is what I refer to as heart consciousness – the source of our liberation and awakening. (By wholesome I mean patterns that enhance mindfulness and compassion, supporting our steps into freedom and awakening.) “We need only to water the seeds of happiness, and avoid watering the seeds of suffering.” (Hanh, 2001: 23)

The conditioning experiences of life, the sum of all our perceptions, the seeds of suffering passed on by our parents, inherited from our ancestors – all this is also in the store consciousness. It consumes everything from everywhere, and it all lies latent within us, and depending on what we foster within us, this becomes the ground for the manifestation of our body, mind and environment. In this sense the nature of our store consciousness can be considered as a food. It receives food, then constitutes itself as food for other levels of consciousness, and is the architect for their manifestation in our life. If we look deeply into the consequences of our consumption and take mindful steps to change, heal and transform, then the store consciousness begins to manifest as the wisdom of the great mirror, reflecting things as they are without distortion or confusion.

To understand this, the following Buddhist model of our consciousness is useful (Hanh, 2001). There is the deepest level – store consciousness - plus seven constantly evolving consciousnesses. Each of the six sensory doorways (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind) has a consciousness, or function of consciousness, associated with it. In addition there is a seventh level of consciousness known as manas, which forms the base for mind consciousness. It directly affects mind consciousness, and through this relationship manas influences the other five sensory functions of consciousness, because they take their definitions and interpretations from mind consciousness. (See Figure 1 by Geary, 2002.) Manas corresponds to our ego and sense of self, and its relationship to store and to mind consciousness is a major key in the puzzle of consciousness. So we need to study the functions of manas in order to navigate our path through to the process of actualizing and coming to rest in heart consciousness – great mirror wisdom, the manifestation of the wholesome nature contained in store consciousness. Of the eight levels,

or functions, of consciousness, it is the relationship between manas and store consciousness that gives us a starting point in understanding.

Store Consciousness and Manas

Thich Nhat Hanh describes the relationship between store consciousness and manas as both subtle and complex (2001:20):

Manas arises from store consciousness, turns around and takes hold of a portion of store consciousness, and regards this grasped part as a separate, discrete entity, a "self." Much of our suffering results from this wrong perception of manas.

As a consequence of its grasping and clinging nature manas distorts and enslaves the operation of mind consciousness. Furthermore it confuses the operations of the other sensory levels of consciousness that arise out of mind consciousness as their base, so that delusion and distortion come to rule our perceptions and feelings. The energy of manas comes from our dysfunctional habits that create suffering. It comes from our cravings and other delusions, which in turn find their form in how we speak, act and think. It is the energy of fear, addiction, hatred and desire. The underlying energy of these, and other, afflictions is that of ignorance. Manas is a grasping consciousness, always calculating and defining things, perceptions and events in terms of a separate sense of self. In order to do this, in the face of the strong tide of interbeing as reality, it creates false modes of perception and maintains them at great cost to the integrity of being. Thich Nhat Hanh states (2001: 97):

The nature of manas is delusion. It is born from the blocks of ignorance that are present as seeds in our store consciousness. It is always there, grasping the idea of self and the idea of nonself. It is always discriminating..... With or without our conscious awareness, that is the work of manas, and it works continuously.

With the creation and projection of wrong perceptions, cravings and fear, which are all based on ignorance, reality will always be distorted. Manas leads us to fill our consciousness with all the props of ignorance that support our ego and our sense of a separate self, and it is no surprise that this causal sequence culminates in us being what we consume – hateful, deeply hurt and wounded, separated from all, constantly suffering. Our mind will always be agitated by ignorance yet it can only reflect things as they are when it is still. There is not an end to suffering until we learn how to do this.

We have to realize that the consciousness encasing our thoughts, speech and action determine whether manas has a grip over how we look at the world. Thich Nhat Hanh (2001; 67 – 72) talks about “leakage,” in that seemingly honorable actions of charity and support, which reflect upon ego, have leaks indicating the supremacy of manas over us. Actions that naturally emerge from freedom, insight and non-fear are free of leaks and therefore free of the brush of manas. There is a long and winding road (as the Beatles sing for us!) between leaks and non-leaks. It is not possible to break the control of manas without using the prism of the Three Dharma Seals – Impermanence, Non-self and Nirvana. From Thich Nhat Hanh (2001, 70) we learn that:

The Buddha spoke of the Three Dharma Seals as the keys to open the door of reality, to touch every phenomenon deeply.

Impermanence and non-self both refer to the absence of a separate self, something that the grasping nature of manas contests. The reality of interbeing, however, lies at the deepest level of our consciousness as truth. Somehow we intuitively know this, otherwise we would not bother to seek it out. Nirvana refers to the ultimate dimension of non-discrimination and non-fear. It is an organic component of impermanence and non-self. The long and winding road of diligent contemplation and the practice of mindfulness allows the mirror of the Three Dharma Seals to give us a way of looking at the world without leaks, and without manas. What is reflected back in our speech, thoughts and actions is our true nature. Yet it takes diligent practice and constant training of the mind in correct perception. This constant training, through mindfulness, cannot be overemphasized. The guidance from true teachers and wise teachings is absolutely crucial for such training to take root in our mind consciousness.

Mind Consciousness

We can see this evolving in the particular relationship between manas and mind consciousness, as there is also a way out as we will discover. Mind consciousness is similar to Freud’s notion of superego. Mind consciousness has manas as its base. Furthermore mind consciousness is the base for the five levels of sensory consciousness (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body). So we see that all levels of consciousness are intricately interconnected, not separate at all, which renders the separating operations of manas as delusional yet important, as it is the human will to transform separation, delusion and suffering that provides the key to spiritual growth. Without manas there could not be any spiritual journey! Manas’ influence over mind consciousness continues onwards to fill the five gateways to the sensory world with distortion

and delusion. But there is a capability within mind consciousness that allows for a different process of perception. Mind consciousness can do something else, other than dance to manas' tune. Thich Nhat Hanh is very careful to point out that false perception is the only field that manas can play in (2001:148), whereas mind consciousness has additional capacities such as perceiving directly or by inference (2001: 126). He adds, however:

But as it (mind consciousness) is based on and influenced by manas, its mode of perception is usually erroneous as well.

By implication this erroneous basis of perception is extended to the five gateways of the senses through which we make sense of the world. As long as manas holds sway over the mind, which also influences the sensory gateways, then we make nonsense of the world as it is, and suffer greatly because we attach the sense impressions received solely to our self and ego.

The way out is to train our mind consciousness in correct perception through mindfulness practice (Hanh, 2001: 119). Mind consciousness contains within itself the capacity of mindfulness to choose to nurture the wholesome seeds contained in the store consciousness, rather than feed the seeds that lead to distortion and despair. When this choice to develop mindfulness takes place the distorting power of manas diminishes. How? Every practice of mindfulness, every occasion of being present cultivates an energy that penetrates store consciousness, going right through manas like a laser beam. Every practice of mindfulness feeds and activates the wholesome seeds in store consciousness, producing transformation at the very core of our consciousness. This is what meditation is for. The flowering of heart consciousness waits upon the activation and actualization of the wholesome seeds contained in the store consciousness. Manas plays a vital role in this process and indicates how and why we are necessarily separated until we choose a course of action through our mind consciousness that fosters only positive attributes and refrains from fostering ignorant attributes. As that occurs it is then possible to step into awakening.

Mind consciousness can be filled with ignorance and delusion, derived from manas, and it extends these attributes to the five sensory gateways. Or it can turn on the tap of mindfulness so that practice enables the seeds of wholesomeness to manifest from the store consciousness. How? Once again – every time we are mindful we create an energy that bypasses the world of delusion and ignorance contained in sensory and manas consciousnesses. This energy warms the collective seeds of wholesomeness, which when activated create the conditions for our

awakening. This is a wonderful contribution from mind consciousness. Thich Nhat Hanh states (2001: 119):

When we are mindful, when we are aware of all our actions of body, speech and mind, we can choose to act, speak, and think in wholesome ways rather than in harmful ways. With the energy of mindfulness generated by our mind consciousness, we can avoid watering seeds of anger, craving, and delusion in our store consciousness and we can water seeds of joy, peace, and wisdom. This is why it is so important to train our mind consciousness in the habit of mindfulness.

While mind consciousness has the capacity of recognizing and seeing in the zone of grasping, craving and attachment, it also has the capacity to develop pure recognition through mindfulness practice. This capacity makes mindfulness practice a necessary food for the spiritual journey, enabling us to do an end run round manas, and eventually transform it by feeding the wholesome attributes of store consciousness, which then manifest in manas. Meditation includes within it the energy of concentration. Together they nurture the joy of being fully present with people, animals, plants and minerals right in the here and the now. They automatically water the seeds of joy, love and understanding in us. Mindfulness practice itself is the most important food that we can provide for our store consciousness, touching what is around us just as it is, enabling us to also be in touch with the deepest part of our consciousness through the joy of daily practice. That is it and that is enough, though “that” requires constant training of the mind consciousness.

When we meditate we send a beam of mindfulness and concentration to break through all the layers of ignorance and distortion, and enter the store consciousness directly. With a clear and still mind we can experience the great mirror wisdom reflecting everything as it is, resting in the foundation of our being. However, for most of our life we live in the zone of ego/manas/self and relate to people on the basis of comparing and discrimination. This is not freedom, so we need to take that mindful step to breathe consciously, to practice mindfulness daily and thereby gain confidence in our path. The energy shines throughout our expression and consciousness as we begin to break through analyzing, comparing and grasping and transform our store consciousness. This is the only way to deal with manas on a daily basis, as the store consciousness contains all the seeds of manas, so if these seeds change then manas will also be transformed. Furthermore manas will not be available to transport ignorance and distortion to mind consciousness. This is our daily gardening in the depths of our store consciousness so we can eventually enjoy the fruits of practice.

The flowers and fruits of awakening will arise from our store consciousness. Mind consciousness has to trust store consciousness, just as a gardener has to trust the land. Both roles are important. Remember, though, that enlightenment, insight, will be brought to you not by mind consciousness, not through your intellectual understanding, but through the deeper wisdom of your store consciousness. After transformation, store consciousness becomes the Great Mirror Wisdom, shining forth and illuminating everything. (2001: 107)

It is not easy to break through all the levels of a discriminating mind. To do so requires that we continue to generate the energy of mindfulness through every step taken. When we are fully aware of each breath and step, and are not carried away by the ghosts of the past and ghosts of the future, our solidity, presence and dignity sends a concentrated energy beam right back into store consciousness. Yet we have to pay special attention to how we take our steps along the path, and take them for the sake of taking them, rather than to seek recognition and attention for doing so. The latter option is still loaded with manas!

All of our practice is to touch the base, our store consciousness, transform it and penetrate into heart consciousness, our Buddha nature. Our perceptions totally change into deep understanding and we experience the world through a different dimension of perception. We are always in concentration and awareness – walking around in the forest, or on the street, sitting alone or with a group - transmitting the laser beam of mindfulness to cut through all blockages and distortion, and dwell with the Buddha at the core of our being. We all have the capacity of awakening. It sees the mind and can transform it. If we do not access the capacity to awaken, then we see the mind through veils of distortion and manipulation and become preoccupied with self importance as we attach yet more “things” to our self. Once in heart consciousness, this all disappears. The leap into freedom is through mindfulness practice so we can be free from all discrimination and attachment to self. To stay in the levels of manas and mind consciousness, full of distortion and ignorance, leaves us totally unconnected and this kills us slowly. Day by day we must retrain our mind so that we enjoy a different manifestation from store consciousness. There is a Zen saying that the goal of practice is to discover our true face. This is Buddha nature, heart consciousness. Manas is not our true face, but that is all we see if we do not practice meditation. Our mindfulness practice is to turn on the energy of pure recognition so that we stay in a zone of our store consciousness manifesting as Great Mirror Wisdom. So “Who is watching the mind?” It is the Buddha nature in our store consciousness. Of course!

Sword Thrusts into Store Consciousness

Without mindfulness we do terrible things to our consciousness. Remember that mindfulness is the basis of everything that is transformative of our store consciousness. The Buddha has a story that emphasizes this. He tells of the capture of a dangerous bandit who one morning is brought before the king. The king orders his soldiers to take the bandit outside and to thrust three hundred sharp swords through his body. At noon the king asks “How is he?” and is told that the bandit is still alive. The king then orders an additional three hundred sword thrusts to be driven through the bandit’s body and so it continues throughout the day and night. The Buddha then told his monks:

This is what we do to our consciousness every day.

We thrust thousands of sharp swords into our consciousness with the nutriments we consume and ingest. The drastic imagery of this story is to bring home the fact that when we consume violence, hatred, cravings, ignorance and greed, we drive sword thrusts deep into our store consciousness, making it impossible to transform at the base. We are often not aware of this, totally in the dark about what we are doing to ourselves and to our loved ones. Somehow we must find a way to choose not to consume sword thrusts. The Buddha pointed out that mindfulness was the only way to stop the sword thrusts, to stop the suffering and destruction to ourselves, to others, and to the environment. The Right View argument from Shariputra considers reflection and investigation on the nature of the nutriments we consume to be absolutely crucial for our ongoing spiritual pilgrimage. Being aware and mindful of all that we consume transforms the unwholesome seeds from our ancestors and conditioning, and provides fertile soil for wholesomeness in our store consciousness to flourish. Please be aware of the consequences of all that you consume.

Two Wolves

I conclude this essay with a story. There are many versions. This one was spoken by White Eagle Woman, medicine woman of the Ojibway.

Her grandson had come home very upset and angry from school. Some school children had bullied him and he felt this was a terrible injustice. He was so angry and full of hatred that he could think of nothing but revenge and of harming them. White Eagle Woman calmed her grandson down, gave him some tea and told him this story.

“I have felt just the same way as you do, my grandson, so many times. A great, big, powerful hate would come over me against people who had been unjust and unfair to me. I was so angry and full of hate because they were not even sorry for what they had done. But I have to tell you something that I really want you to learn. That hate you have got inside cripples you and destroys you. It just wears you down so that you become useless and cannot do anything worthwhile. The hate I felt did not even harm the people I was angry with, but it harmed me. The hate would catch in my throat and it would feel like I was swallowing poison, all the time I was wishing harm to the people who had wronged me. I have had a great struggle with these feelings, especially when I was a young girl.

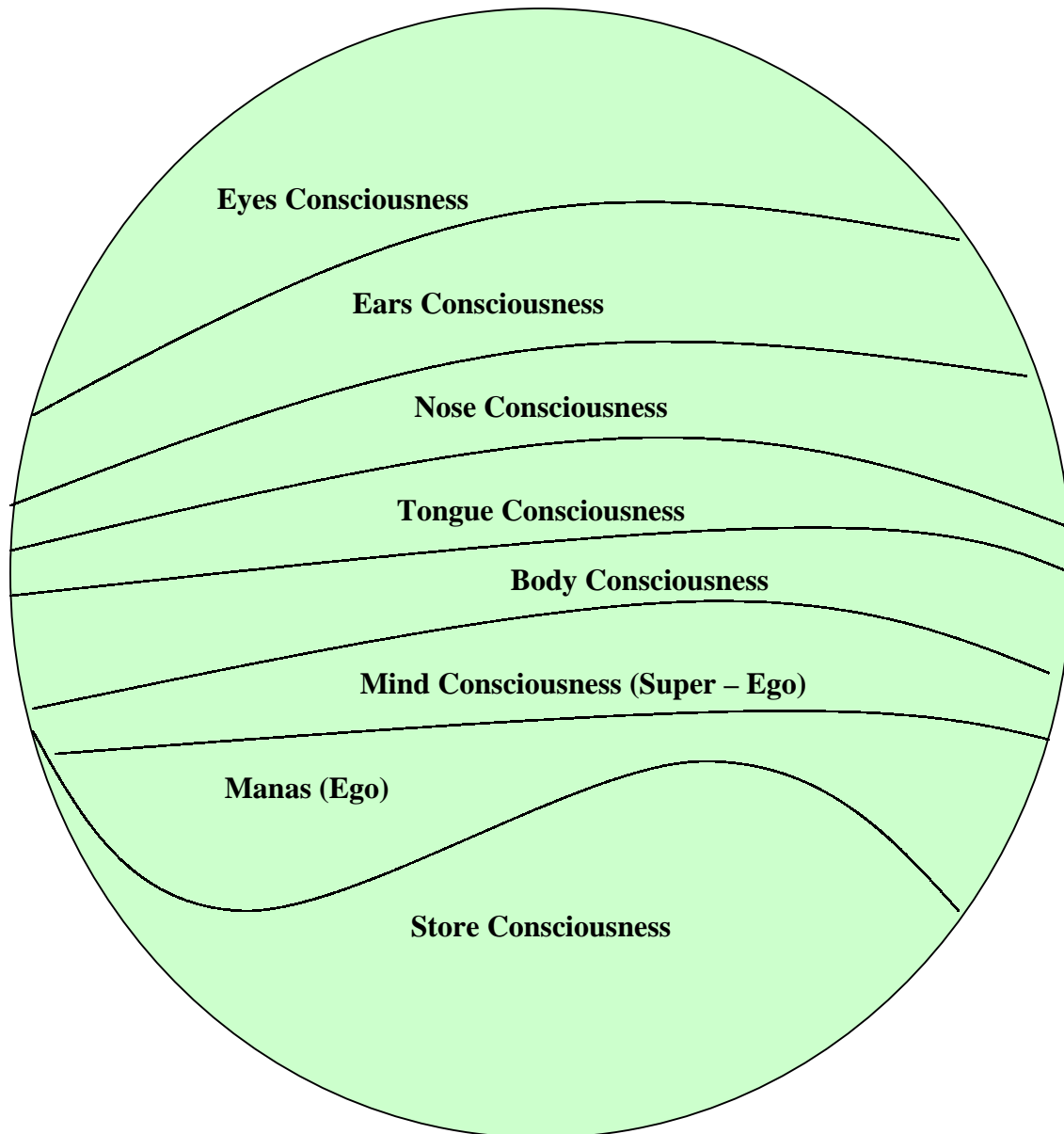
You know, my grandson, it is as if there are two big wolves running around inside of me. One is a white wolf, gentle, powerful and kind. He looks after everything fairly and gets on with everything in his environment. He does not get mad or full of hate when things go wrong. He just finds a way to put things right. The other wolf – oh boy you should see him. He is a big, powerful black wolf and is totally vicious. He is so full of anger, hatred and meanness. He bites and kills and it takes nothing at all to set him off on a rampage. It’s like he is always ready to explode and do harm. He cannot even think straight, because his anger and hatred are so huge. Everyone is scared of this black wolf.

I tell you, my grandson, it is real hard for me to live with these two wolves inside of me. Both of them do their utmost to overwhelm and dominate me and take over my spirit.”

The grandson’s eyes were large and round as he listened to his grandmother. He had never, ever heard her talk like this before. He drew his face close to his grandmother’s and in a whisper he asked “O my grandmother, which wolf wins?”

His grandmother smiled to him, taking his face gently in her two hands and quietly whispered back “ O my grandson, the one I feed.”

**Figure 1. Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) Transformation at the Base.
Mahayana Interpretation of Manifestation – Only School.**



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Figure 1: Transformation At The Base

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